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good internet

Coming home to the small web

"Blogging and webweaving changed my life"

Finding good community on Mastodon

Falling in love with the internet again

Whimsical accessibility

Building a slow web

FEATURING

The web we lost was here all along

good internet

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Letter from the Editor

What you are holding in your hands is nothing short of a miracle, pulled together by a bunch of strangers on the internet. We are here to celebrate our hobby, to relish in the stories of others, and bring something physical into the world that reflects this. Despite headlines to the contrary, I am happy to report that the internet is not dead. Far from it. The stories inside this magazine prove the publication title true: the *Good Internet* has always been there. You just have to find it, and our writers have shown you the way. Now, more than ever, building your own website and having your own plot of land on the web feels like an act of resistance against the horribleness of the world. This hobby, a passion for some, allows you to create *anything* from nothing, and that's a power itself. Building one's own website provides a voice to the voiceless; a void to scream into; a commons for like-minded folks to congregate and discuss; a research tome to find the truth; a place that, despite your social standing or financial means, is wholly and completely yours to do with what you wish. For those from marginalized communities – in which sometimes our mere existence is an act of resistance – your words, your art, and your *self* is on display for the world to see before anything else. It's a stake in the ground that you were here to both readers and history. Human-created personal websites might be a small percentage of the web, but the radical act of claiming your own data and owning your platform has more impact on the real world than we think. In this inaugural issue, you'll hear from many different website owners and internet enthusiasts who deeply love the 'net. I hope you'll find some company in the inherently solo hobby of coding websites. We need each other now more than ever. The wide, wild web needs us.

good internet

'gud in·ter·net

a magazine for website owners, coding hobbyists, and internet enthusiasts

The web we lost was here all along

Lessons we can learn from fandoms online

by Sacha Judd

In December 1993, the New York Times published an article about the "limitless opportunity" of the early internet. It painted a picture of a digital utopia: clicking a mouse to access NASA weather footage, Clinton's speeches, MTV's digital music samplers, or the status of a coffee pot at Cambridge University.

It was a simple vision – idealistic, even – and from our vantage point three decades later, almost hopelessly naive.

We can still do all these things, of course, but the "limitless opportunity" of today's internet has devolved into conflict, hate, bots, AI-generated spam and relentless advertising. Face-swap apps allow anyone to create non-consensual sexual imagery, disinformation propagated online hampered the COVID-19 public health response, and Google's AI search summaries now recommend we eat glue and rocks.

The promise of the early web – a space for connection, creativity, and community – has been overshadowed by corporate interests, algorithmic manipulation, and the commodification of our attention.

But the heart of the internet – the people who built communities, shared knowledge, and created art – has never disappeared. If we're to reclaim the web, to rediscover the good internet, we need to celebrate, learn from, and amplify these pockets of joy.

First stop: your favorite place

In the 1990s, the internet was still in its infancy. Going online was an event – a ritual involving dial-up modems, screeching connections, and text-based browsers. The early web felt like a vast, uncharted galaxy, but it was also surprisingly small.

In 1994, there were only about 10,000 websites and 2,500 web servers. You could buy physical directories – books and magazines – that mapped out the "information superhighway," because it still made sense to have an offline map to the online world.

Search engines were years away from making the web easily searchable. Instead, we relied on hand-curated directories, maintained by individuals who updated them sporadically. Your online journey often began with a university homepage, an ISP's list of "what's hot," or a recommendation from a friend. Jean Armour Polly, the librarian who is credited with first coining the term "surfing the internet," says that she liked that metaphor because, like the sport, finding your way around wasn't easy – it required skill, patience, and a sense of adventure.

Once online, the novelty of accessing news headlines quickly wore off. What kept people coming back was the ability to connect with others who shared their interests. The social heart of the early internet was Usenet, a kind of proto-Reddit where people gathered to discuss everything from science and technology to books, TV shows, and hobbies. It was here that I discovered transformative fandom for the first time – a community of fans who didn't just consume media but debated it, re-imagined it, and created art and stories that expanded its universe. For me, it was *The X-Files* fandom, and it felt like home.

Who's the mayor of this town?

It was in these fandom Usenet groups, discussing the mythology of *The X-Files*, that I cut my teeth as a citizen of the internet. Many of the norms we now take for granted – FAQs, content warnings, and even the concept of what was then quaintly called "netiquette" – were born in these early communities. Initially, most of this was dictated by the form. In an effort to make posts readable, they needed to be concise. Long elaborate email signatures were annoying, posting binaries or other large files where they would clog up news readers was downright rude, and typing in capital letters was deemed shouting.

Virginia Shea, writing in 1994 and attempting to summarize these rules, noted, "When you're holding a conversation online – whether it's an email exchange or a response to a discussion group posting – it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning. And it's frighteningly easy to forget that your correspondent is a person with feelings more or less like your own."

For the first time, strangers were meeting other than face to face, and without any of the social context clues that would have previously guided us in person.

In the beginning, the internet was the domain of the relatively tech-savvy, often university students and researchers. Every

September, a wave of new college first-years would join, who were unfamiliar with the existing norms and culture of Usenet. Experienced users expected this temporary disruption, and after a few weeks, the newcomers would learn the ropes, and things would return to normal.

The culture of Usenet changed forever in September 1993, when America Online gave its massive user base access to the platform. The influx of new, less experienced users overwhelmed the community's ability to teach them the ropes. This period, known as "Eternal September," marked a permanent shift in online interaction.

Moderation became a necessity, and communities developed their own DIY governance systems. In fandom, this meant detailed FAQs, content tagging, and disclaimers. Early "ship wars" led to splintering communities, dramatic discourse, and a burgeoning sense of fandom ethics. Examples of these chasms include fans who believed that characters like Mulder and Scully should be in a romantic relationship and those that didn't, and fans who saw Harry Potter finishing the books with Hermione Granger as his girlfriend and others that preferred to imagine him with sworn enemy Draco Malfoy.

This was a pioneering era of self-governance and group accountability. If you didn't want to stay in a particular community or online space, you were always free to make your own.

Keep it secret, keep it safe

As a baby lawyer in my "real" life, I was struck by the disclaimers that prefaced every piece of fan fiction I read. Some were simple acknowledgments of copyright ownership; others were elaborate pleas not to be sued. There was a certain frisson around doing something infringing. Was all this storytelling actually illegal?

It turns out that much of that had to do with the vampire Lestat. Anne Rice, the author of the popular series of novels beginning with *Interview with the Vampire*, stated that she did not approve of transformative fans engaging with her characters. By 2000, she had become even more adamant – posting on her own site that she "did not allow" fan fiction about her copyrighted characters. She used lawyers to send cease and desist letters to fans – a move that would later be copied by 20th Century Fox in relation to *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files*, and JK Rowling in relation to sexually-explicit Harry Potter fan fiction.

The message was clear: transformative fandom was tolerated only as long as it didn't threaten the bottom line. Today, of course, we're very familiar with corporations wielding content take-down notices and cease-and-desist letters, but back in the late '90s, this seemed a lot more confrontational and frightening. In response to these letters fans folded, lacking the money or resources to respond to legal threats from creators, and they either removed or hid works.

Writing in *HotWired* (the first online magazine, part of *Wired*) in 1997, Steve Silberman summarized the then-dubbed War on Fandom:

"The problem is that the nature of fandom has changed fundamentally in the past 30 years, while perception of the role of fan culture in marketing campaigns has not. No longer content to be passive consumers, fans – especially those on the Net – now expect to be listened to by those who create the culture they enjoy. They demand to be in the loop. Both the fans and the media companies want to cheat a little. The media companies want to parade their Web savvy in the marketplace and they want to funnel all the Net traffic into a few commercial sites. The fans want to have freedom of speech and assembly in sites of their own choosing and to have fewer constraints on the use of copyrighted materials than in any other medium."

These clashes shaped fandom's non-commercial ethos, which persists to this day. Fans learned to operate in the gray areas of copyright law, creating transformative works for love, not profit. But it also put fan communities at odds with the corporations that owned the intellectual property – and, increasingly, the platforms that hosted their work.

Homemade web

As fans migrated from Usenet to the early web, some communities found a home on Yahoo! mailing lists. And the fans themselves began building their own personal spaces. GeoCities pages, webrings, and hand-crafted websites became the norm, because from the outset, fans sought to preserve and protect their creative output.

The X-Files was not just my first fandom but also one of the first fandoms to have a large-scale central archive of all posted fan fiction in The Gossamer Project. Because the archive welcomed all kinds of stories regardless of subject matter, *X-Files* fans developed a comprehensive way of coding their stories to make it clear to readers what was inside. "MSR" meant the story was about the Mulder/Scully relationship. "UST" stood for unresolved sexual tension between the two. The MPAA rating system was used to denote the content, from G for general audiences to NC-17 for explicit or graphic content. A self-categorizing system that would lead the way for content warnings and the tag cloud era to come.

By the early 2000s, I had moved on to *The West Wing* fandom and finally built my own website to host my fan fiction. My fandom friends and I taught each other how to code, design, and maintain our pages. Even as archives became more popular, none of us wanted to lose control of our stories to another site that might disappear overnight or not let us change them or take them down. This peer-to-peer knowledge sharing was vital. I learned how to stop hot-linking (because bandwidth was expensive!), how to find episodes in .rar format and recompile them, how to digitize VHS tapes to cut together fanvids, and how to use early music-sharing tools like Limewire to find the perfect soundtrack.

Gradually, I learned to build and maintain my own little corner of the web, choosing how to share it with others. I linked to my favorite authors. I made rec lists of my favorite stories. I participated in and ran fan-voted awards and exchanges and challenges. I had a whole life, a home, on the DIY web.

You don't own me

Fans have always been early adopters, quick to try new platforms and tools and make them their own. But they've also been quick to abandon them when those

platforms no longer served their needs.

Maciej Ceglowski, the founder of Pinboard, gave a talk in 2013 called Fan is a Tool Using Animal, about when Delicious, the bookmarking site that was the darling of the era, made a series of changes that made the site unusable for the fans who had been using it to meticulously tag their fan fiction collections. Seeing the disappointment and unrest among fans on Twitter, Ceglowski tweeted fans to ask what they might need to make the switch to Pinboard. Over the next couple of days, dozens of fans came together anonymously to collaborate on a Google document and produced a comprehensive 52-page technical spec.

"Having worked at large tech companies," Ceglowski said, "where getting a spec written requires shedding tears of blood in a room full of people whose only goal seems to be to thwart you, and waiting weeks for them to finish, I could not believe what I was seeing... several dozen anonymous people had come together in love and harmony to write a complex, logically coherent document, based on a single tweet."

Perhaps the most well-known example of fans taking their destiny into their own hands is the story of the creation of Archive of Our Own. AO3, as it is known, is a noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting site for transformative fanworks such as fan fiction, fan art, fan videos and podfic.

The project started on the heels of a startup company called Fanlib attempting to make a commercial archive that fans would submit their stories to for free. Fans were unimpressed that a company would profit off their creative work and began to post about alternatives.

LiveJournal – at that stage, one of the main online homes for fandom – then bungled an attempt to remove accounts based on a list of "illegal activities" and suspended or deleted hundreds of fandom journals in a moral panic that came to be known as "Strikethrough."

Fans realized that the transgressive nature of transformative fandom was always going to be at odds with companies that wanted to make money off advertising or companies unwilling to defend content on their platforms from complaints and threats.

The Archive was entirely built and designed by volunteers from fandom. Many of the people working on the project acquired skills in coding, design and documentation through their work on the Archive. When the project went into open beta in November 2009, it had over 20 contributors, all of whom were women, and it remains a shining example of an open-source project that has created an inclusive environment that welcomes people without "traditional" development experience.

The Archive now has over 14.6 million uploaded fanworks, 8.1 million registered users, and has fanworks in over 70,000 fandoms.

Keeping the past alive

Fandom's need for archival permanence has led to remarkable grassroots preservation efforts. The Open Doors project at AO3 is a great example of this commitment to preserving fan history. Recognizing that many older archives were at risk of disappearing as their maintainers moved on or hosting costs became prohibitive, Open Doors established a process to import endangered archives into AO3, preserving not just the works themselves but their contexts and metadata.

This archival impulse stands in stark contrast to the ephemeral nature of corporate platforms, where content can disappear due to policy changes, acquisitions, or shutdowns. Fan communities understand that their creative works have value beyond the moment of creation – they're part of a continuum of cultural conversation that spans decades.

The importance of archiving extends beyond fan fiction to all aspects of fan culture. Projects like Fanlore (also run by the Organization for Transformative Works, the parent nonprofit behind AO3), a wiki documenting the history and terminology of fandom, ensure that the institutional knowledge and cultural context of these communities aren't lost. Without such efforts, each new platform migration would risk erasing the rich history that came before.

At a point in history where we are watching the current US administration dismantle institutions and direct the erasure of databases, websites, and historical records, the kind of preservation at the heart of fan communities has never been more important.

Tumbling along

David Karp, the founder of Tumblr, said back in 2012: "The only real tools for expression these days are YouTube, which turns my stomach, ... They take your creative works – your film that you poured hours and hours of energy into – and they put ads on top of it. They make it as gross an experience to watch your film as possible. I'm sure it will contribute to Google's bottom line; I'm not sure it will inspire any creators."

When Tumblr launched in 2007, fandom took to it like a duck to water. It combined a place to share the strongly visual content that was increasingly possible (photos and GIFs from your favorite shows) with a new way of "conversing" through weblogs and tags. It had the aesthetic appeal of being able to design your own page and theme, which felt like the personal approach of MySpace or GeoCities but far more beautiful. And the dashboard let you curate a personal feed of all kinds of interests in one place. The tag structure made discovery easy, but then was turned into something unique. Fans developed their own tagging systems and also used the tags for conversations and creation in themselves.

And unlike Facebook, Tumblr allowed for complete anonymity – something that was crucial for fans. Tumblr took on a life of its own, mainstreaming a focus on social justice, sex positivity, and cultural identity for a whole generation long before anyone dared to misuse the word "woke." But as with LiveJournal before it, the time came when the corporate landlords decided to act.

In 2018, Apple removed the Tumblr app from the iOS App Store because of the ability to access objectionable material on the site. Instead of acting to improve moderation, trust, and safety, Tumblr elected to ban all adult content from the site, sending its user numbers into a terminal decline. Acquired by Yahoo! for $1 billion in 2013 and sold for $3 million in 2019, fandom die-hards are still there sharing GIFs of the hot firefighter show, but it's

never been the same.

We all live in the town square

As we moved into the social media era, fans were again among the first to embrace the new tools. Seeing the potential to boost their faves, Twitter users were for the first time able to drive trends, hype singles, outpace celebrity gossip sites, and propel artists and celebrities to a new kind of stardom. But the shift from small, self-governed communities to centralized platforms came at a cost.

Unlike the online communities of old, with our quaint attempts at self-governance, agreed shorthand, and etiquette – venture capital-backed social media platforms prioritized user growth above all else. And they quickly found that the fastest route to "engagement" was through conflict. While fans have always disagreed with one another, and ship wars are a time-honored tradition, social media cast everything onto a larger stage. Stan wars, toxic fandom, and terms like "parasociality" made mainstream news headlines.

Everyone began to experience context collapse. Bad faith readings of tweets propelled unsuspecting civilians to being the "main character," piled on by strangers. The internet embraced the algorithm. We no longer had much of an ability to curate our own day-to-day experience online. Instead, the apps prioritized feeds filled with advertising, rage-bait, misinformation, and clout-chasers – things that would keep us doom-scrolling as long as possible. Gone was the central idea of communities gathered around shared interests. We were all just existing in a handful of noisy, overcrowded, post-apocalyptic online cities.

The reality is it's become dehumanizing – this many people online. And so we are seeking out alternatives to the noise and the crowds and the hate. Fans, like almost everyone else, are drawing back into smaller private neighborhoods. Social Discords and Slacks. Group chats. Newsletter commenting threads. Ask people where their favorite place on the internet is now and it's going to be an obscure private Facebook group about a podcast they like.

The reason fan communities continue to embrace Tumblr is because in many ways it's the antithesis of mainstream social media. There's no algorithm. Sure, you can like a post, but it does nothing to extend its reach. And honestly? Good luck ever finding a post again after the first time you see it. Tumblr introduced the ability to pay for a sponsored post but in typical Tumblr fashion, there's no targeting, no guaranteed impressions. Just the ability to pay $10 to share a photo of your lizard on other people's dashboards.

As a venture capital investment, Tumblr is a disaster. But as a place to hang out? It can be a delight.

Our corporate landlords persist in trying to control everything we do online, fundamentally putting them at odds with fans (and sex workers, and activists, and survivors, and so on). On TikTok, we've seen the rise of "algo-speak," defined by Taylor Lorenz in the *Washington Post* in 2022, where users adopt a "brand-safe lexicon that will avoid getting their posts removed or down-ranked by content moderation systems. For instance, in many online videos, it's now common to say 'unalive' rather than 'dead,' 'SA' instead of 'sexual assault,' or 'spicy eggplant' instead of 'vibrator.'"

Contrast this with the early web, where fans controlled our own content and distribution. Where we wrote and made art about whatever we liked.

> *"There are no limits to the web – if it has borders, they are ever-expanding."*
> **— Molly White**

The internet is outside the walls

I first started thinking about this when I read Molly White's piece, "We Can Have a Different Web" from her Citation Needed newsletter:

"The walled enclosures that crowded out much of that acre of developed land still reside within an infinite expanse of possibility.

"There are no limits to the web — if it has borders, they are ever expanding. We may feel as though we are trapped in a tiny, crowded, noisy space, but it is only because we don't see over the walls."

It inspired me at the end of last year to build my second-ever website. I built a single-serve site to help me plan a new layout for my LEGO city. It was a wild journey involving a lot of ChatGPT as my sometimes-helpful coach, a poor replacement for the friends who taught me two decades earlier. This little website wound up being a finalist in the Tiny Awards, which "exist to celebrate the personal internet, the other web, the one that is small and handmade and isn't trying to sell you anything or monetise anything but which instead is about people using the digital tools we all have access to to make the sorts of small, personal experiences that you tend not to see 'in feed.'"

This is what I want to focus on in my online life now: this other web.

We're witnessing a resurgence of the personal web, a quiet revolution against the homogenized social media landscape. Personal websites, newsletters, and indie social networks like Mastodon and Bluesky are gaining traction among those disillusioned with corporate platforms. Fandom continues to be at the forefront, experimenting with decentralized technologies. Discord servers have become the new mailing lists, offering private spaces for discussion free from algorithmic interference. The growth of personal newsletters echoes the webzines and digests of early fandom.

What's most striking is how these new

tools are being used in old ways. The POSSE approach – Post on your Own Site, Share Everywhere – is gaining popularity as people reclaim ownership of their digital presence. It's a return to the pre-platform internet, where your online identity wasn't tied to a single corporate entity; building your own forever-home instead of "renting" attention on someone else's platform.

The challenges, of course, are significant. Building and maintaining your own digital space requires time, skill, and resources that not everyone has. And there's the eternal question of audience: if you build it, will they come? But perhaps that's the wrong framing.

The value of the personal web isn't measured in reach or engagement metrics. It's about authentic connection, creative expression, and control over your digital footprint. In fandom circles, "reach" has historically just been a function of the community you've built around you. In my earliest fandoms, being "popular" came with writing and posting a great story people liked.

As the scale of the fandoms grew – and with it the concept of "big name fans" – recognition still came with connection: friends who recommended your stories, mutuals on Tumblr. Sharing our favourite things is a love language. That's how we get the good internet back.

The blueprint for reclaiming the web

We've had the instructions for saving the web in our hands all along, we just haven't focused on them. If you, like me, haven't built a website in many years, it's time to give it a go again. Use AI copilots if your skills are dusty. Show a young person in your life how you do it while you're at it. Empower them to resist platform dependency.

Don't settle for corporate landlords who don't care. You don't need to stay on a platform that dismantles its trust and safety team, that says that slurs are welcome, or that Nazi propaganda is "free speech." No audience is worth that. Vote with your wallet.

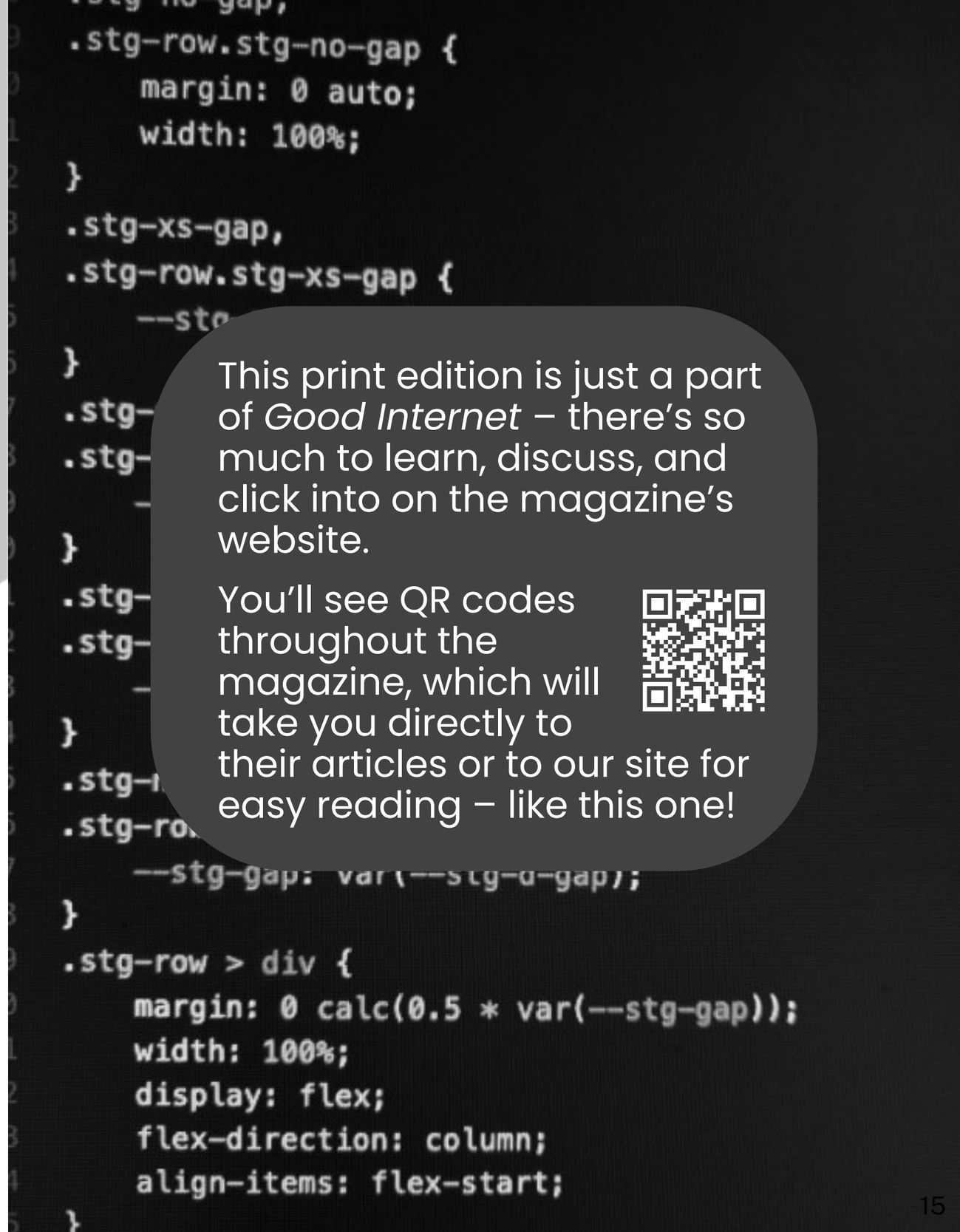
Embrace the new tools – Bluesky's CEO Jay Graber appeared at SxSW this year wearing a shirt that read *Mundus sine Caesaribus* ("A world without Caesars" in Latin). It poked fun at Zuckerburg's now infamous shirt that read *Aut Zuck aut nihil* ("Zuck or nothing"). Bluesky lets you design your very own custom feeds, build your own communities, and control your own scroll. We should expect nothing less than an internet without emperors.

The strength of the early web wasn't in its scale, but in its diversity and interconnectedness. We don't need a billion-user replacement for Facebook. We need thousands of vibrant, self-sustaining communities linked by shared interests and mutual respect.

The web we lost has been here all along, quietly thriving in the corners corporate interests haven't fully colonized. By learning from fandom's resilience and creativity, we can start building a different, better internet – one that serves human connection rather than corporate profit. It won't happen overnight, and it won't be without challenges, but the blueprint is there.

All we need to do is follow it. ■

Sacha Judd is a writer based in Aotearoa New Zealand who focuses on pop culture, media, and the intersection of technology and fandom. You can subscribe to her newsletter at sachajudd.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align-items: flex-start;
}
This print edition is just a part of *Good Internet* – there's so much to learn, discuss, and click into on the magazine's website.
You'll see QR codes throughout the magazine, which will take you directly to their articles or to our site for easy reading – like this one!

Falling in love with the internet (again)

by Zachary Kai

I started accessing the internet (at least a version) when my primary school had the bright idea (and funding) of buying a set of 20 iPads for the school to use when they attended Information Communication Technology classes.

Being ten-year-olds, when we weren't being taught how to browse the internet or research facts online for a book report... (Don't you dare you use Wikipedia!) We played games. Endless ones.

And while that version of the internet, at least the 'approved-by-the-Apple-app-store' and 'educationally appropriate' one, was fun... It got boring.

Even in the days before TikTok and people sounding the alarms about shrinking attention spans, I felt it, regardless of my ignorance.

Things got more interesting when I reached the final grade of primary school (and my final year of traditional schooling) when we got laptops.

Remember those? Clunky little netbooks that ran for hours on battery power? Yes, those were the days. When we considered Windows 8 to be state-of-the-art.

We learned the wonders of PowerPoint and Word. (I seemed the only one who enjoyed Excel.) Our training was unorthodox: a presentation through a music video for Footloose by Kenny Loggins, and formatting a document through an exquisite corpse writing exercise. My former ICT teacher would approve of the poetic web.

Before being a self-directed learner, computers and the internet were a mere blip in my life. The only time I spent playing with these tools was during ICT class, which was once every two weeks. Yes, I also practiced Spanish on Duolingo on the family's ancient Samsung tablet, made fake news programs and Lego stop-motion videos, but that was it. I still listened to music from CDs, on a small stereo my parents bought me. I spent most of my time reading paperbacks. Books were my greatest love, and remain so today.

Once I escaped the rigors and biases of the flawed system, the world opened up to me.

And it was all thanks to Scratch.

For those unfamiliar, Scratch a visual programming language, and a social learning site for kids, both developed and run by the MIT Media Lab and the Scratch Foundation. I spent hours on that site as a preteen, immersing myself in everyone else's creativity.

I didn't just consume. I also created.

I made many things: art, gifts for folks, a music video, games... Everything I could think of.

Learning a programming language is how I learned to love writing. Besides the internet and reading, is my favorite thing in the world.

In those glorious times of being a preteen, unencumbered with self-doubt, the world's judgment, and a willingness to try everything, I thrived. Though I still read, the internet became my one love.

Until I discovered another way of using the internet. One that left it lifeless. Being a mere consumer.

YouTube, once a learning haven, became an endless time-sucking black hole. I ditched email in favor of the latest messaging apps, and even joined Instagram. The sites I visited changed from ones where I'd learn and interact, from ones where I would scroll and numb.

And it still mystified me why that spark had gone out.

I resented the technology which had only been my greatest joy.

And yet, that's the strange thing. I viewed the internet as a powerful, nebulous presence shaping my thoughts, actions, and feelings. How we see the world becomes the world itself.

And so it remained.

From my late teens to my first year of being in my twenties, this attitude remained. And yes, I did many wonderful things involving the devices I depended on: I wrote my first two novels and submitted my work to short story competitions. Wrote, edited, indie-published, marketed, re-edited, and republished my space opera adventure trilogy. Made art and exchanged letters with folks from around the world. And still... the malaise hung over me. Nothing could shake it.

Until 2024. The year when everything changed.

The initial seed of inspiration came

in early 2023, when I listened to a podcast interview with a man who's changed my life for the better. I'm a longtime listener of the *Tim Ferriss Show*, hosted by the eponymous host. In 2023, he interviewed Derek Sivers, founder of music distribution service CD Baby.

While I was proficient at countless applications and surfacing the information I needed, I'd never gone a layer deeper. Though I knew a little about HTML and CSS, it was only out of necessity for adjusting WordPress themes. I'd convinced myself I could never be technical, so I never tried.

I'd fantasied about having a website, but that's the thing about dreams. As long as you don't attempt them, they remain perfect. You can't fail at something you've never begun.

The simplicity he suggested approaching the learning process blew me away. I didn't know all one needed for a website was a hosting provider, a domain, some HTML files, and a CSS stylesheet.

I hesitated. I hedged. I dabbled, grew frustrated, and started from scratch. And yes, it was fun, but I learned nothing. Staying safe yet unaccomplished inside my comfort zone. It only took me twelve months to do something about it and another two to put it on the internet.

My website has been live since the 2nd of June, 2024, and I intend to maintain it for as long as I live.

What changed? The people. I've always been a solitary type. How can you tell?

The personal, the small, the poetic, the quiet... Whatever you wish to call this corner, I discovered a different way of being. Creating instead of mindless consumption. Emailing strangers and having thoughtful discussions instead of fleeting messages which never receive a reply. Exploring through hyperlinks instead of scrolling. It was a revolution.

In this way, one serendipitous discovery leads to another. Discovering *Links I Would G-Chat You If We Were Friends* lead to Naive Weekly, which lead to Diagram.Website, the IndieWeb Wiki, and the 32-Bit Cafe, and what'll be a brilliant first issue of the *Good Internet* magazine.

One evening, while exploring Maggie Appleton's digital garden, I found her essay about the history of digital gardens. It wasn't just her writing which fascinated me: it was how the page worked. Each concept linked to another, creating a web of connected thoughts. Like Wikipedia.

This wasn't the infinite scroll I'd grown accustomed to. It felt alive.

Each link opened a door to a new room in an endless house. Something surprising and delightful.

That night, I stayed up far too late, following trails of thought from one personal website to another. It was the opposite of the mindless consumption: this was active exploration.

Compound interest applies to the lovely corners of the web too!

Over the brief eight months I've had my site, I've written over thirty thousand words, joined webrings, learned a little HTML, CSS, XML, and Apache, taught myself how to use FileZilla, submitted posts to the IndieWeb Carnival, attended Homebrew Website Club, and discovered countless wonderful folks from all walks of life.

I may not be an expert programmer, but I've learned more than I dreamed possible.

My first technical challenge came when I tried to add an RSS feed to my site. I've used RSS readers for a few years, and wanted folks to have the chance to subscribe to my site if they so wished.

When I discovered I had to learn XML, I froze.

I spent three evenings struggling with the syntax, creating feeds that refused to validate. So many error messages! I almost gave up. (Easy to do when you have no idea what you're doing!)

Then I remembered Derek Sivers' approach: start with the simplest version.

I started again, only with the title and URL of my latest post. When that worked, I added the publication date. Then the author details. Piece by piece.

When I got that green 'valid RSS feed' message... What a thrill!

Everything I learn deepens my appreciation for the world.

And while I'd say I hope there's more to come, it's more accurate to say I know there will be. Because how I (and you) experience the web is in my control.

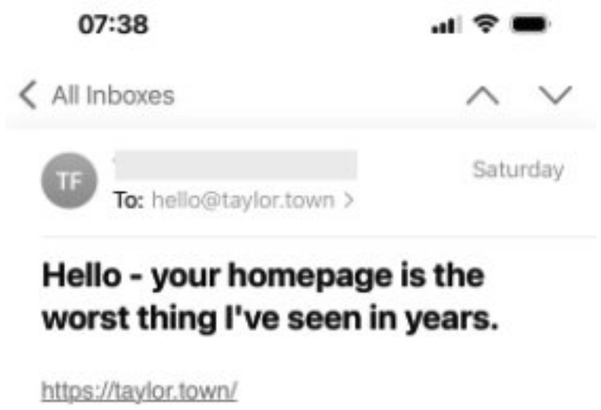
It's only taken me twelve years to find out.

I have so many ideas for what I want my site to be, it'll take years to fulfill them all! (At the time of writing, adding a custom search function, a dark mode, and a contact form are next on the list.) And that's what I love about it. An infinite canvas, yet constrained enough so it isn't overwhelming.

While I titled this piece 'how I fell in love with the internet (again)' I should've called it 'how I fluctuated between love and hate toward the internet over my short lifetime (so far)'.

That's the cursed beauty of growing up. Falling in and out of love to find yourself. ■

Zachary Kai is an Australian queer writer and generalist who crafts science fiction about resilient souls among stars in between making zines and collecting skills. He writes with American spelling and British punctuation: a linguistic wanderer. The internet is his livelihood and lifeline, and he documents his existence at zacharykai.net.



My website is ugly *because* I made it

by Taylor Troesh

If my mom wanted good art on her fridge, she could've purchased reprints of works by Vermeer, Lichtenstein, Wyeth, etc. But she didn't want good art – she wanted my art.

Somebody with good taste could've made my website, but then it wouldn't be mine.

To bake bread, many feel compelled to grow wheat, mine salt, culture yeast, etc. Not me. My puerile palate yearns for buckets of Olive Garden breadsticks.

That's okay. Your "mine" is not my "mine."

Some folks run self-hosted websites on solar power. Others share wisdom on Substack. This guy posts manufacturing deep-dives to YouTube. Gwern does whatever this is.

It's an itch – a feeling that something is really important, and you need to do something about it, and nobody else can possibly do it except you.

I am not compelled to bake bread, nor provision servers, nor build chips. Yet that itch pervades, and it pulls me toward humor and systems and life and software and structure. And when emotion becomes unbearable, it erupts out of me: fiction, HTML/CSS, crappy robots, sad songs, and so on.

My website is my website.

In the past, I just wanted simplicity and friendliness: remove noise, boost contrast, flatten menu depth, boring HTML, reduce CSS, avoid JS, etc.

But things started going sour when I decided to occupy as much horizontal space as possible.

The plan was simple: slap **`flex-wrap`** on a **`ul`**. Unfortunately, text wraps too. It was unclear where one link ended and the other began. Some folks read **`inline`** and others perceive **`inline-block`**.

More whitespace? Yikes. Borders around each link? No way. Dots between the links? Yuck.

So, let's vary the links! The chaos you see on my homepage comes from a few simple rules:

```
li:nth-child(4n + 0) {
transform: rotate(1deg); }
li:nth-child(4n + 1) {
transform: rotate(-0.6deg); }
li:nth-child(4n + 2) {
transform: rotate(0.5deg); }
li:nth-child(4n + 3) {
transform: rotate(-0.75deg); }
li:nth-child(6n + 0) { font-
family: Times; }
li:nth-child(6n + 1) { font-
family: Helvetica; }
li:nth-child(6n + 2) { font-
family: Georgia; }
li:nth-child(6n + 3) { font-
family: Times; }
li:nth-child(6n + 4) { font-
family: Arial; }
li:nth-child(6n + 5) { font-
family: "Trebuchet MS"; }
```

I originally chose coprime integers for more variation, but I rather liked the subtle repetition in this pattern.

I love minimalism and hate sterility. I sprinkled three additional surprises to evoke a "used bookstore" feeling:

```
li:nth-child(5n + 2) { font-
weight: 100; }
li:nth-child(7n + 2) { letter-
spacing: -1px; }
li:nth-child(41n + 31) {
transform: rotate(181deg); }
```

To continue reading this story, use the QR code below to visit the Good Internet website:

Can accessibility be *whimsical*?

by Sara Joy Wallén

It started out with me just trying to find a cute word to put with a11y, the numeronym for accessibility. Because you have to buy a cute domain name for every side project idea, of course. And as much as I try to say “a-eleven-y” of course my brain always reads it as if the 1s are ls.

I have been spending the last year or so thinking about how to enable what I've been calling “laypeople” – meaning non-developers or non-internet-nerds – to build their own websites.

Web revival or web never left?

A lot of us miss the “old” web and the webrings and the surfing and the eccentric personal websites and the communities that formed across them. I'm pleased to have found out (while setting up a webring myself and welcoming people into it), that this old web didn't go away. A lot of corporate web and e-commerce and social media silos have sprung up around it of course, but the sprawling personal website village is still there. New people keep moving into it as old ones leave. It's alive and well (see MelonLand's Surf Club and so many sites on Neocities), and there’s a surprising number of active webrings!

Just because this personal web is now proportionally much smaller than the huge platforms that exist and help the laypeople to blog and network with each other, it doesn't mean it's any less vital or central to our living web. I'd even consider it the beating heart.

Not-so-a11y

What it isn't, really, is very accessible.

Saying that makes me want to immediately add reasons and excuses for it, but first, just let it sit there. So be it. The personal web – unless it's a website belonging to a developer within accessibility circles – isn't all that accessible.

I have many thoughts, and maybe you do, too. If you have a personal website, please don't feel attacked, even if you see a picture of yourself here. This is your home on the web and it's for you to tinker with, to explore, to experiment.

Does your real home have a wheelchair ramp? A stair lift? A bathroom that can fit a wheelchair? Braille labels on things? Special taps for arthritic hands?

Mine sure doesn't. I mean, not yet. My father just got a stair lift and I remember my Nanna getting taps and kitchen tools that were easier on her hands.

Inclusivity

My implied question here is: does a personal website need to be accessible? Probably not. Many are resolutely not even responsive to mobile screens – and I actually salute those that add a declaration that proudly say so.

Here's where the idea for whimsica11y comes back – many people want their personal sites to be accessible. A lot of personal websites I've seen belong to people who are part of one or several of queer, trans, gender-fluid, neuro-diverse, leftist, anarchist, sex-positive, disabled, and other communities. They are not really in the game of being exclusive; rather, they are more keen to be as inclusive as possible.

I started building the Whimsica11y website for this audience, but I stalled out. Partly, I ran out of time and energy, and some other new shiny idea got in the way – and partly, I started to worry I was about to give out advice that would be pushed back on, that I'd get told was wrong, that I would exclude people by accident. I think this is a common fear about accessibility which scares people away.

Looking up advice

A few people will have gone looking for accessibility advice. Some of them find good resources, like this accessibility guide by Solaria or a11yphant. Others come across the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Maybe some don't find the friendlier Introduction to Web Accessibility by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) helpful and find reading the guidelines to be like swimming in pea soup. That document is remarkably cognitively inaccessible, given that it's promoting accessibility.

But it's not written for us as personal website builders. It's written for governments, commerce, service providers, officials, and auditors.

Sometimes you come across some nicely designed, bite-sized information that's easier to take in, and yes, good. But if you follow it all to the letter it's... a bit dull, actually. Some people worry that being accessible gets in the way of artistry – and, in some ways, they might be right.

A lot of the punchy advice that one sees in places like LinkedIn aren't necessarily following just the guidelines, but rather describing a sort-of best practice for the kinds of sites that (legally, in some places) have to be able to be used by everyone and then as efficiently as

possible.

This is especially true in Europe because of the European accessibility act (EAA). There's much stricter legislation coming in about the accessibility of businesses providing goods and services to consumers.

More people are likely going to be seeking the International Association of Accessibility Professionals' CPACC and WAS certifications for accessibility. In order to renew this certificate, IAAP requires active participation in the a11y sphere, which can include speaking, teaching, and writing series' of blog posts with a minimum 5 posts per series.

This will hopefully increase the amount of advice out there, but this will probably also not be targeted to hobbyist website makers. Just be warned there may soon be a lot more advice around to sift through.

For now, though, here's some best practices for accessibility in the personal web.

Reframe alt text

Let's talk about alt text on images. A graphic or photo in a news article or technical illustration needs to have a brief description in its alt text that summarizes its value to the reader, and on we go. Cool.

But what about that picture on your website that's actually a picture of some art you did? Or a treasured photo of a pet or relative? Should you limit the description to under 200 characters? Should you be trying to just keep it brief?

In my opinion: No way! If the image means a lot to you and makes you feel lots of things, go to town and describe those things so that someone with a screen reader can understand and feel them too.

Good vibes only

Your website might have a vibe that comes from the general color scheme and decorative images around the place. Technically, purely "decorative" images should have an empty alt="" so that they're totally ignored by a reader.

But how else will visitors get that vibe? Is your content clearly written to go along with that sort of feeling? Or could you stash some information in those alt texts or in a visually hidden paragraph? Can you find another way to impart your vibe to the reader who can't see? How many inventive ways can you find to express yourself that aren't purely imagery? How about more use of sound?

I do actually find that personal websites are more likely to have multimedia going on; an embedded music player or midi tinkling away. I used to find this horribly annoying, but it feels so rare now. I like to let MelonLand's audio just keep looping. It's pretty and calming, just like the visual design.

Where to start

We can try to get around our websites without a mouse by using the arrow keys or the Tab key. Are all your links and buttons accessible with Tab and actionable with Enter or Space? Can you see where your focus is on the page, on which link or button you have landed?

We can browse our site without any images, and see if it's still interesting or if it makes sense without descriptions.

We might get brave and use a built-in screen reader (VoiceOver for MacOS, Narrator for Windows, and Orca is available for Linux), or install NVDA on Windows for free, and listen to our websites. Can we get the screen reader to find all the text available and read it out? Is it speaking sense?

We can provide subtitles or transcripts for audio within embedded videos or podcasts for those who can't hear it.

Some people record occasional blog posts as podcasts, the best of both worlds!

If not WCAG, then what?

If the guidelines aren't written for the personal web, what rules shall we follow?

Well, even if a website follows all of WCAG, it can still manage to make itself inaccessible in myriad creative ways. I suspect you can also have a pretty accessible site even if there are some guidelines that you don't meet or aren't aware of. What I mean is: don't read the WCAG document unless you want to work as a web developer.

What you can do is read the WAI's Accessibility: It's about people section or watch its videos.

We can try to put ourselves in the place of the people we want our sites to reach. Find videos that show people using assistive technology. Follow people with disabilities and see what annoys them online. Ask your disabled friends what they'd love to come across on the web.

Don't panic!

There is so much we can do. But like the homes that haven't got any disability affordances, you're not going to get into trouble for not doing these things on your homepage. These are just ideas, for now.

Take one idea, or one kind of disability, and see what you can do to enable or maybe even amuse someone who is using the relevant kind of assistive tech.

Bit by bit. Little fix by little fix.

Before long, we'll be including silly little Easter eggs to liven up the experience of our disabled friends online.

We all deserve a little more whimsy.■

Sara has been extremely online since 1998, making her own personal websites since 1999. She fell off the wagon some time around 2010 until getting back on it in 2021 to switch her career from electronic engineering to front-end web development. She loves the web platform and wants it to be accessible to everyone. You can find her at sarajoy.dev.

Finding a good community on Mastodon

by Liz Roboto

I remember when all of my friends in high school were on AOL in the ’90s, and I wanted to be on it too, so that I could chat to them and discover what the internet was. I was very lucky and eventually convinced my parents that we really need this new technology called “a computer” so that I could type out school papers, and use the internet for research. I really just wanted to chat with my friends and discover AOL, chat rooms, and satisfy all of the curiosity I had about the World Wide Web. We eventually got the “top-of-the-line” computer: a gray HP Pavilion with a DVD player, speakers, and 17” monitor. It was insanely expensive and I’m grateful that my parents saved up to get us a family computer. Now I felt connected to the web.

I was always obsessed with finding new cool people to talk to online. It was fascinating that I was able to chat to anyone across the United States and the world, in different time zones, and about any subject. AOL chatrooms were fascinating because some where generic, some were role play, some were nerdy, and some were places I avoided. Instead of learning about BBS’s and IRC, I had AOL and chat.

Fast forward a whole lot to the end of the 2010s, and I wanted to get into gaming, since I neglected that most of my life as a big tech nerd. I was into fighting games on my NES/SNES as a child and my PS3 as a young adult, but not much more than that. I wanted to learn how to play first-person shooters and action-adventure games. I found a gaming podcast community and some amazing people who helped me learn a little bit about the games I wanted to play. I remember during this time discovering, through Discord, an open-source social network called Mastodon. I was trying to understand what decentralization meant. What’s “federation?”

The first instance I joined was mastodon.social, which was a bit overwhelming, and then I went to mastodon.technology, where I found some tech-focused, nerdy people that I got along

with, but the owner had to understandably stop supporting the server since he didn't have the time to maintain it. I then moved onto other tech-focused servers, a gaming server, and finally, where I am now: social.lol, a really awesome community of tech people, writers, gamers, travelers, and a really cool bunch of folks from all over the world.

Finding a good community on Mastodon can be a fun journey, but it requires some exploration. Mastodon is an open-source, self-hosted, social networking service. It's decentralized, meaning there are many instances (servers), each with its own culture and community guidelines. I like to think of it like email; someone can sign up for email on various servers such as Gmail, Outlook, or Fastmail, and own an address (name-at-emailservice.com). You can send an email to anyone, and receive email from anyone. Same with Mastodon.

The social part of Mastodon comes mostly from the work you put into it, just like when you sign up for a forum or set up an email address. It's not algorithm-based like Twitter or Instagram. It's very much how things used to be, where we had to curate people, forums, RSS feeds, and websites that we want to follow and interact with. Chatted on a forum and didn't like someone? Block them. Like a particular subject in a forum thread? Follow it and interact. No algorithms got in the way to "assume" what you wanted to read. Mastodon is more of a manual, organic process. It has a "home" timeline of user accounts based off what posts you interact with. The best place to focus on is the "local" timeline, where you'll find other people on the same instance as you're on. This is how I found most of the people I follow today. I focused on the local timeline, then followed other people that popped into my home timeline via the interactions I made with them. This includes "favorites," "boosts," and replying to people each day.

The best way I can describe finding a good community on Mastodon is putting in a little bit of work being patient, learning the tools such as filters and blocks, and realizing that it's very different to big corporate social media of today. There is no algorithm to "assume" who you might want to follow. You need to interact with people and manually follow who you want to, and mute or block if you run into someone you never want to see. Hashtags are also very big on Mastodon, and they're one of the best ways to find topics on what you want to follow. Hashtags are the way you can filter out or block content that you don't want to see, or follow a particular topic that you always want to see.

There is a bit of an etiquette that's developed on Mastodon more than other social media platforms, which I appreciate. Adding a content warning for gross images or topics that might trigger people is really important to show care. Adding alt text is inclusive for folks who need to use screen readers to "see" the images online. I even find it helpful for myself to see the alt text for context many times (without using a screen reader), so it does benefit everyone. I appreciate the content warnings and filters the most, so that I can escape or tune into a topic for a little bit, depending on my needs at the moment.

I've had way better interactions with folks on Mastodon than any other social media all of these years, since I reach out to people who have the same interests, -- whether it's in tech, photography, gaming, blogging, or the small web space. This is the part where my friends who are used to more traditional social media haven't grasped the concept. Blasting a general message on Mastodon likely doesn't gain traction with favorites (likes) or popularity, because there is no algorithm or gaming to the system to "push" it out to as many people as possible. Mastodon and Activity Pub-based social networks are about curating actual relationships, not posting for follows, likes, or views.

I really like Mastodon because you can bring your followers with you if you decide to move instances. Not everyone agrees, but I don't mind that you can't bring your posts, since to me, Mastodon posts should be ephemeral, and not permanent. They are posts about your current life, mood, or topic of discussion, not an archive for years to save. That's where having a blog is handy, and to me, pretty vital if you want a presence on the internet. Many people like to join instances where you can post over 500 characters, but in my opinion, if you want to write that many words in a post, a blog post is more useful instead. If someone wants to have a discussion, linking a website to a shorter post is great, and people can reply as it comes. Post or tweet threads to me are a bit chaotic and it's harder to follow a discussion that way.

Mastodon has been a really great place for me to find a variety of interesting people that I want to keep in touch with. It takes a little bit of work, but it's worth it to find awesome relationships and communities. I write this as a technology-forward person, so I'd love to hear how people feel about Mastodon who aren't as technically inclined. Is it as tough as people say it is or are people just used to corporate social media "deciding" timelines and followers for them? It's a different way to think that is more independent and in your control. It's closer to the "good old web" to me, where you can focus on curating what you want to read, see, and share.

You can pick a Mastodon server via joinmastodon.org or instances.social, or even better, by asking someone who is already on an instance. In my opinion, joining an smaller instance (less than 1,000 users) that is focused on a common theme or service is slightly better than joining a huge general instance like mastodon.social, because you can find folks who have similar interests from the get go. On a really big instance (over 10k users), I find that there is too much going on in terms of different subjects, personalities, and you have more to curate with filters and finding common interests. Good luck out there!

I'd love to hear from you about your experience if you decide to join Mastodon! Let me know on Mastodon at @binarydigit.■

Liz Roboto (she/her) is a technical director at a small media company who was born and raised in New York, and currently living in Michigan. She loves the indie web, tinkering with code, loves to travel, stream games, art, music and practice photography. You can find Liz's portfolio at lizroboto.com, but you can find her fun personal site at binarydigit.city.

Site creation as content *transformation*

by Jan Miksovsky

Making a website would be so much easier if the web came with a good conceptual model for thinking about site construction. If you're making a spreadsheet, the spreadsheet grid provides a vital conceptual and spatial scaffold for your work, helping you break down your data entry and analysis tasks into manageable parts. The web offers nothing like that grid.

To read the rest of this story, scan the QR code or visit ***goodinternetmagazine.com*** *to read more.*

Introduction *to* Flexbox

by varve

Flexbox is a modern, commonly-used layout system that can be intimidating to some.

It's a "one-dimensional" layout system. Much like a sentence has one "direction," from start to finish, it can be wrapped across multiple lines while remaining fundamentally one-dimensional.

Flexbox can seem two-dimensional, because each flex item (or "word" in the flex "sentence") can be quite complex and contain things laid out in the other direction (column vs row), but each flex container can only be one dimension.

Ready for the rest of the tutorial?

Visit **goodinternetmagazine.com** or scan the QR code for instant access.

Capturing the vanishing culture of amateur radio online

by Kay Savetz

This article is republished in partnership with the Internet Archive.

Amateur Radio has been a hobby for well over 100 years. For as long as there has been an understanding of electricity and radio waves, people have been experimenting with these technologies and advancing the state of the art. As a result, the world has moved from wired telegraphy to tube radios to telephones—fast forward a century—to GPS and high-speed digital communication devices that fit in your pocket.

Advances made by amateur radio experimenters have propelled the work of NASA, satellites, television, the internet, and every communications company in existence today. People fiddling with radios have pushed forward technological advances the world around, time and time again.

And yet, the people making these efforts, doing these feats, aren't always the best at documenting and preserving their work for the future. That's where Internet Archive comes in.

I'm the curator of the Digital Library of Amateur Radio and Communications. DLARC is a project of the Internet Archive, and my job is to find and preserve this rich history of radio and communications. DLARC collects resources related to amateur radio, satellite communications, television, shortwave radio, pirate radio, experimental communications, and related communications.

In the two years since the project launched, DLARC has preserved thousands of magazines and journals, manuals, product catalogs, radio programs, and conference proceedings. These materials were scattered worldwide, often inaccessible and in obsolete formats. We've digitized material that was on paper, cassette tape, reel-to-reel tape, CD-ROMs, DVDs. We've digitized video from 16mm film, VHS, U-Matic, Betacam and even more obscure video formats.

We've built a collection of more than 140,000 items and made them available to the world. Researchers, academics, and hobbyists use the library to learn from the rich history of this 100-year-old hobby.

One reason this preservation is necessary is that the people creating history don't always realize at the time that they're creating history. In 1977, the creators of Amateur Radio Newsline—a weekly audio news bulletin—probably didn't realize that their project would still be going on in 2024, 47 years later. And for all of their amazing work, if they had realized they were documenting history, they might have made more effort to save those recordings: the first 20 years of their work are missing. (DLARC has found some recordings from 1996, then most of them since 2012.)

Sometimes creators do recognize the importance of their effort. For more than six years, Len Winkler hosted Ham Radio & More, a radio show about amateur radio. Winker recorded every episode on cassette tape and managed to digitize many of the shows himself. However, the process of digitizing hundreds of episodes is tedious and he wasn't able to complete it. With his approval, DLARC stepped in to finish the job. They're all online now, more than 300 episodes including interviews with many notable names in the radio community.

There have been other huge successes: the entire 43-year run of *73 Magazine* is digitized and online thanks to the publisher, Wayne Green, who donated the collection to Internet Archive before his death. Most issues of *The W5YI Report*, a ham radio newsletter that was published for 25 years, are online as well.

Attempting to preserve material years, or sometimes decades, after the fact makes systematic preservation nearly impossible. For every success story of content saved and archived, there is a heartbreaking story of loss. When amateur radio enthusiasts die, their media collections are often disposed of by survivors who don't have any connection to amateur radio. File cabinets and bookcases full of (sometimes irreplaceable) materials are emptied into recycle bins.

Another challenge to preservation and access is membership organizations that keep their material behind paywalls. They sometimes prevent any of their information from being lent in an online library, which it is their right to do. However while they actively thwart efforts at preservation, it remains unclear whether those groups are adequately preserving their own history.

Some material is preserved intentionally, but a good amount was saved purely by accident. The material we recover and digitize has come from attics and basements, from libraries discarding obsolete material, from long-forgotten FTP sites, from scratched CD-ROMs, and from the estates of people who have passed.

So we float where the radio waves take us, trying to preserve the past as much as possible, while encouraging today's content creators to consider how to make their material accessible to future generations.■

Kay Savetz is curator of Digital Library of Amateur Radio & Communications. DLARC is funded by a grant from Amateur Radio Digital Communications to create a free digital library for the radio community, researchers, educators, and students.

Read more on the Internet Archive Blogs by scanning this QR code.

Building a slow web

by Greg Sarjeant

The internet can feel like it's built for speed.

You join a new service and you're presented with a feed. The name tells you all you need to know. The feed is the actor. You are the thing that is acted upon. You don't control the feed. Your role is to be fed.

The feed is relentless. It's even shaped the way we see ourselves. We don't read books or watch movies or listen to music anymore. We consume content – ingest what we're fed.

A lot of people have realized this and are unhappy about it. Since you're reading the inaugural issue of *Good Internet* magazine, you're almost certainly one of them. But what can you do? How can you be in the feed and not be carried away by the feed?

I tried to control the feed. Used hashtags and block lists to focus it. Forced myself not to click. Stopped for a moment to breathe before I replied.

But the feed never stops flowing, never stops pushing. Resisting that flow is a constant act of will. It requires vigilance. It requires maintenance. It's exhausting. And in the end, the feed always wins. So I opted out. Left the feed.

It doesn't have to be this way and for a long time it wasn't. I remember the early internet. The internet I grew ...

Okay look, I already feel like a crotchety old man. I've probably mischaracterized social media at least 5 times. I might have even said something like "the facebook." I don't know and I'm afraid to go back and check.

So what I desperately want to say here is "the internet I grew up with," but I was already in my 20s when we all set Gopher aside and started checking out this newfangled "world wide web." I'm not here to lie to you. The reality is that I am getting old and I was always just a little bit crotchety. Let me just adjust in my rocking chair and get back to writing.

I assure you that you're welcome on my lawn.

The internet I came to love was quieter. Smaller – which is not to say small. It was still vast, but it was a vast collection of small sites instead of a small collection of vast sites.

I spent a lot of evenings and nights reading people's sites. As I did, I learned all sorts of things. For instance, those *Star Blazers* and *Battle of the Planets* cartoons I loved as a kid were called anime and the form had come a long way! (You might want to check it out.)

I loved learning about what people loved. A new site was a cause for joy. A new post a source of wonder. I started to notice that for everything someone loved, there were a lot of other people who also loved that thing. If you spent a little time reading about a topic, you'd find links to other sites by other people who were writing about it. Invariably, you'd find a community. Bands, technologies, comics, philosophies – it didn't matter. There were a bunch of people with websites about it and a bunch more hanging out on an IRC channel or a forum dedicated to it. (If it was a forum, it was probably running phpBB.)

But as the sites were replaced by feeds, the learning was replaced by reacting. The joy by fatigue. The wonder by indifference. The communities by hashtags.

I left the feeds, but I never stopped missing

“Discovering the personal web has been more like making a new friend.”

the internet they replaced. Every now and then I'd spin up a website in an attempt to recreate a small piece of it, but after a few months I'd drop it.

At the beginning of the year, I decided to try again to build a website. But then I decided I'd probably just drop it in a few months again, so I decided to look for a platform instead. Then I got annoyed with myself for giving up on the website idea before I'd even started, so I went back to it. Then I decided to scrap the first website and rebuild it in a different way. It was a pretty indecisive few weeks, but in the midst of all my waffling, I realized that a lot has changed since the last time I did this, so I started doing some research. As I was learning how people build websites in 2025, I found some references to something called the “IndieWeb.”

Perhaps the biggest change since the last time I built a website is that there are a lot of people talking about building personal websites now. At the IndieWeb wiki, I found a link labeled *Visit a random site*. I clicked it and an hour vanished. I went back and tried again. Similar result.

I discovered a webring and – wonder of wonders – an IRC channel! I started to feel that familiar sense of community. Here was a small group of people who were all very passionate about a very specific topic. The more I read, the more motivated I was to tinker with my own site and get posting. So I did. I got up and running and made my first post and something refreshing happened.

Nothing.

Nobody responded. Nobody reacted. Nobody requested to follow me. Nobody pretended to want to follow me so they could try to sell me something. Yet despite this, I still felt more a part of a community than I had in years. In the quiet, I've been able to think about why that is.

If I only ever bump into you at parties, I'm never going to get to know you. I'll only know the things that you can shout over the din, that you don't mind everyone else knowing. I'll know some things about you but I won't know you. We may become acquaintances – even strong ones. I might think fondly of you and look forward to seeing you at the next party. But we'll never be friends.

When I make a new friend, it isn't fast and it isn't loud. My strongest relationships all developed over time. They grew in quiet moments: over coffee, on a walk, playing a game, discussing something inspiring or something repulsive. In these moments I can learn who you are instead of what you want to project.

When I was in the feeds, it was like always being at a party: all activity and noise. Everything came at me fast. I made a lot of connections, but they were tenuous and when they were gone I didn't feel much sense of loss.

Discovering the personal web has been more like making a new friend. I've stumbled across a community that I feel a kinship with. It's energizing. I want to get to know everyone and try to do everything, but I'm fighting that impulse. Or at least, I'm fighting the impulse to try to do it all now.

Instead, I've decided that my personal web is going to be a slow web. I'm taking those tentative next steps to deepen the relationship. Sharing a bit more of myself. Hoping it won't be rejected. Listening. Always listening.

I've posted to my site five times since I started it in January, and one of those is a copy of a guide I wrote 20 years ago. I spun up a Mastodon instance and have followed a grand total of four people. I read a few blog posts a day – things I find on the IndieWeb stream or through shares on Mastodon. It's not a lot, but it's enough to make me feel a part of something. I haven't felt that in a long time.

I'm not writing this to say that this is the right way to “do the personal web.” One of my favorite things about the personal web is discovering all the different ways that people make it their own. This is the one that works for me. I find that by keeping the web slow, I'm able to build the kind of relationship with it that I have with my friends. There are things we disagree on. Some people are more dogmatic than I. Some are more optimistic about AI. We don't share all of the same interests. I don't get the appeal of 88x31 buttons or garish colors.

But outside of the rush and the noise of the feeds, my reaction to these differences has changed. When someone here holds a position I disagree with, they have time and space to explain the reasons why and I have time and space to understand those reasons – even if I don't agree in the end. When someone is interested in something I'm not, I still can't help but be inspired by their enthusiasm even if I'm not inspired by the object of that enthusiasm. This is how my strongest relationships have developed. The similarities create bonds. The differences catalyze growth.

So I plan to stick with the slow web. I do worry about missing out on things. There's so much to discover here and it's hard to suppress the urge to try to absorb it all at once. But I also know that it'll be here next week, or next month, or next year. My hope is that if I keep building a slow web, so will I.■

Greg is a former hobbyist sysadmin who made the mistake of turning his hobby into a career. He's in the process of reverting it to a hobby at subcultureofone.org.

Close to the metal:

Web design & the browser

by Ovi Demetrian Jr.

The craft of building websites evolves when it follows web browsers, instead of fighting against them.

Websites have evolved over the years, but in the name of evolution, there seems to be mistaken thinking that the process of building a website needs to get more complex, using JavaScript frameworks and modern back-end systems; when at the end of the day, browsers still only need static HTML content to interpret.

What comes out of this is a broken web. And a path in the wrong direction that may permanently damage the democratized web, where websites are meant to be built by anyone. Leading to a future where websites run on the promises of AI and Web3 blockchain tech, and we have to do a rain dance to the machine gods and pray things work.

The wrong path

The reason social media platforms have taken over people's content is because there is a perception that setting up a website is inherently difficult. While there is certainly some work involved, the amount of effort some people put into their social media posts is more work than getting a domain, finding a host, and uploading some HTML templates to publish their content.

And when someone wants to get a website designed professionally, they are told they need performant server hardware to handle JavaScript frameworks to translate their Figma designs into HTML. When we can do it all without the JavaScript framework, without JavaScript altogether, and without even having to use design apps! Our tools are supposed to make things easier for us but seem to be getting more complicated, with added layers to the process that just creates more unnecessary work.

With these layers comes a sluggish user experience for websites. It also ends up missing the full range of features that browsers offer. There was a recent discussion about why mobile websites suck. It's not because our mobile phones are less capable, but because the way websites are being built has gotten so bad that people are gravitating towards using apps that do the same things websites are able to do.

It seems like the misguided perception of needing to use complex tools and frameworks to build a website comes from a thinking that web browsers are inherently limited. When, in fact, browsers have evolved to a tremendous degree. We're just not utilizing its development model correctly.

> "Ten or fifteen years ago, the gap between the web and native apps on mobile was entirely technical. There were certain things that you just couldn't do in web browsers. That's no longer the case now. The web caught up quite a while back."
>
> —Jeremy Keith in "The web on mobile"

The right path

Just because browsers support JavaScript doesn't mean we should try to use it as much as possible. JavaScript frameworks may make sense for developing web apps (and even there

in a limited amount), but for websites, it was always meant to be used only for specific cases. The same goes for special back-end server software. Content is always just HTML and there is actually very little that needs to be done outside the scope of displaying content that would require any special server software or any JavaScript at all.

Even in cases where there used to be a need for JavaScript, browsers have adapted by building in patterns that have become standard practice. For example, submitting forms used to require JavaScript for validating fields. Now, it's no longer the case – browsers do it all, and in a way that's more accessible.

CSS continues to move forward in browsers with year-over-year feature additions that also replace the need for JavaScript, including robust layout techniques, animation and transitions, and even logic! When it comes to design tools for the web, CSS is in fact a design tool. And more designers should learn to utilize it as such.

JavaScript and CSS frameworks just end up recreating features that are already built into the browser, and worse, end up fighting against the way browser technology works. The development experience is worse off with bloated code that's difficult to maintain.

> "...truly understanding how HTML and CSS worked unlocked my ability to create actually user-friendly interfaces. That's our job as designers. It's not to pontificate over design tools and their ever expanding features; it's to design things for people."
>
> —Andy Bell in "The time for designers to learn to code is now"

Correcting the path

The bad news is JavaScript frameworks, and costly servers to handle them, are big business, and companies are being convinced that having both for their website is what keeps them relevant. The good news is, with the bad in place, we are able to comparatively show how much better things can be when done right. And the right way to code for the web is not only better for users and designers but also for companies.

There's no need to use platforms controlled by companies that lock you into their ecosystem or whose business model works to serve their advertisers above their users. We can own and control our own content. And it can be affordable and accessible.

The browser itself is a framework: HTML and CSS (with a sprinkling of JavaScript). A framework that is flexible enough that we can publish all of our content using it, for any website, big, or small. And, the web itself is a platform: of domain addresses and host servers that anyone can have access to setting up, and send anyone to easily pull up.

Changing the future

Going down this path leads towards the right kind of innovation for the web of the future. With improved ways to design, and better tools, that follow core browser functionality for producing our content.

It frees us from platform lock-in and leads towards #indieweb principles, for a truly decentralized model that we're each in control of, allowing us to feel more empowered over platforms.

> "What's brand new today starts to show its age much more quickly than something that's already stood the test of time."
>
> —Harry Roberts in "Build for the Web, Build on the Web, Build with the Web"

It leads towards the original promise of the democratized web for more people to publish their thoughts and ideas.

It leads towards us taking back the web!■

Ovi has been designing and building websites for over 20 years via Distinctive Quality (distinctivequality.com). He is the co-founder of the Blocks Edit visual CMS, and the founder of Indie Aisle, tools for independent creators.

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> "What have we done?! We've signed up to Facebook, the site formerly known as Twitter, GMail, Medium and all the other convenient services. Now our lives are full of shitty ads, we're being tracked wherever we go and someone else is controlling the content we see, all the while profiting from whatever content we create."
>
> —Markus Hofer in "Let's take back the Web"

homecoming: the small web and release from the unitary public self

by Dr. Molly Tov

In 1776, a Quaker living in Philadelphia recovered from a severe illness with a peculiar conviction: they had died and been reborn as the Public Universal Friend. The Public Universal Friend was sans gender but avec mission: to spread the message, received during the illness, that there is "Room, Room, Room, in the many Mansions of eternal glory, for Thee and for everyone."

To this day, scholars debate the nature of the Public Universal Friend's transformation. Was the Public Universal Friend a trans or non-binary person? Or was the Public Universal Friend a woman, as assigned at birth, who embraced gender non-conformity to acquire some measure of personal and professional freedom? Is the Public Universal Friend's identity reducible to an object lesson on the tyranny of gender roles, the tyranny of sexism, or the universal nature of God? Or did the Public Universal Friend, like all of us, contain multitudes?

There may be "room, room, room" in Big Tech's servers for billions of accounts. But there is no room for more than one self.

Mark Zuckerberg once famously claimed that "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity." Big Tech has largely followed this theme, flattening us into unitary "users" or "customers" whose behavior can be profiled, predicted, and manipulated.

When anyone can follow us across the Web with one Google search, there's significant pressure to compress ourselves into a public unitary identity or "personal brand." I spent fifteen years of my career selling the "personal brand" to my clients – and inflicting it on myself.

The Public Universal Friend may have found liberty in a rebrand, but I only found oppression in mine. The greatest liberation the small web has given me is freedom from the tyranny of the Public Unitary Identity.

the corporate web ruined my writing

A few months ago, I wrote a blog post titled "the small web is rehabilitating how I write." In it, I noted that I've made a living as a writer for over 25 years. I made the vast majority of that living by writing for the corporatized, commercial Web: what I called "The Web of Selling Things. The Web of Engineering People's Behavior So They See More Ads and Buy More Stuff. The Web of 'What Sells.'"

To no one's surprise, decades of churning out the kind of "content" that has cluttered search result did no favors to my writing. I made the Web worse, and I made my writing worse in the process.

"SEO" gets only part of the blame. The attitudes and expectations that created "search engine optimization" did most of the damage. The corporatized Web assumes that "the customer" has a Public Unitary Identity too. "The customer" does not want to think, to plan, or even to read.

As a commercial Web writer, my job was to convince the customer that whatever curiosity, desire, or need drove them to the site could be satisfied by clicking "buy." Thus, everything written for "the customer" required a surface-level take presented in a chipper, somewhat urgent cadence. As I described it in my blog post:

It's a superficial, plasticky approach designed to give the reader just enough information to get them to buy something or to click the next article – but never enough information to satisfy them. This lack of satisfaction is by design. A customer satisfied by reading won't make a purchase. Nor will they spend additional time on the site, click more links, or return for additional advertising-packaged-as-content. The writing is not a product or a conversation. It's a wrapper.

Decades of writing like this did more damage than I realized. I migrated to the small Web out of a personal and perennial dissatisfaction with the time I spent on social media and commercialized Web sites and blogs. I missed something I knew I'd experienced but could not name. I found it on the small Web – and faced a professional reckoning.

in which i understand and embrace my failures

The reason I was so bad at building a Public Unitary Personal Brand for myself is that I tried to fit all my varied interests, skills, and careers into a single, saleable "brand image." That's hard for any human to do; we all contain multitudes. Add the fact that I've had dozens of jobs and four entirely separate careers now, and the job became nearly impossible.

I couldn't compress myself into a brand slogan. I tried. But I could not sell the idea that "Molly" was someone who was "passionate about marketing!" or "committed to my career!" when I've had four separate careers in 30 years and only market anything so I can eat.

Attempting to cram all my actual skills, experience, and interests into a single unitary brand was terrible for business. My constant discomfort with it showed in my work. I edited blog posts over and over. I deleted, un-deleted, and rearranged my work more than I actually wrote. The Public Unitary Web Site was a mess, and so I was I.

Writing for my Public Unitary Personal Brand blog was an exercise in self-dentistry. I hated it. I avoided it. I had regular cases of writer's block. And I hated myself for hating it. If "writing" were really my "passion," surely I'd be overflowing with enthusiasm for fantastic ideas like "Top Ten Keyword Research Strategies" and "How to Optimize Your Site for Voice Search." Right?

I might even have believed that I deserved to be bad at Web marketing, except that I'm actually pretty good at Web marketing. Just not when the "product" I have to crush into flavorless paste is me.

When I wrote the Bear Blog post about the small Web rehabilitating my writing, I said I'd preserve some of my cringiest Public Unitary Personal Brand stuff for posterity. I will not. I'll only release that stuff again if someone pays me handsomely to do it. And that person is getting a PDF. I'm done making the Web worse.

the personal web is rehabilitating me

In "the small web is rehabilitating how I write," I cite several signs of my rehabilitation: "I'm calmer. My attention span is better. I get genuine satisfaction from both my online and my offline activities."

The trend has continued. In the two months since I quit social media and deleted the Public Unitary Personal Brand blog, both the volume and quality of my writing have increased. Instead of fighting myself to write one blog post a week, I have to restrain myself from writing more than one or two a day. Sure, some of them are bad, but my interest in writing shows up daily. It used to be nearly non-existent.

My attention span is growing back, too. As I wrote in another recent blog post, "I went from barely surviving 1,500-word articles to actually enjoying 15,000-word articles. ...I can watch entire television shows again without jonesing for The Scroll."

I spent years telling clients that the sweet spot between their customers' attention spans and Google search engine rankings' tolerance was 1,500 to 2,000 words. And it is. That's about all any of us can tolerate of manipulative, plasticky marketing content intended to manufacture a need and sell us the solution.

I thought I couldn't stand reading anymore. Turns out I just can't stand reading Web. 2.0 drivel. On the small Web, I prefer longer pieces. The kind written by humans for humans.

Most importantly, computers are Fun again.

computers are Fun again

My first program wasn't the classic "Hello World." It was a personal variant. Sometime circa 1992, I learned about BASIC's PRINT command and immediately made our old Apple IIGS introduce itself to me: "HELLO MOLLY I AM THE COMPUTER."

Stuck in a house in the middle of nowhere (we didn't even have touch-tone service until 1998) and forbidden from owning video games for most of the 90s, I made the most of our Gateway 2000 by learning everything I could about how to navigate and manipulate both the DOS shell and the Windows 3.11 settings, to the annoyance of my parents. I spent hours on that machine – so many that my mother cut me off more than once.

I built the computer I took to college with me in 2000: a PIII 500 with a 2-GB hard drive and a profligate 256MB of RAM. With access to my first-ever stable Internet connection, I started learning HTML and made my first website.

I switched to a laptop in grad school, because I needed a machine I could carry on the mile-long walk to and from classes. Free time became a laughable luxury, and my Web site fell by the wayside. Instead, I became an early adopter of Facebook, LinkedIn, WordPress, and Twitter. I stopped trying to fix my own hardware and ceded control over much of the software.

Somewhere between graduate school and my first corporate job, I let myself become an end-user. And computers... stopped being fun.

I have enjoyed the computer more in the past two months than I have since 2002.

I'd forgotten how intensely satisfying HTML is. I write a thing. The page changes. I see if what I wrote did what I wanted it to do. It's immediate, straightforward, direct, logical feedback from my writing. One cannot get that kind of feedback from editors of English prose, because the meaning of a word or phrase is always up for discussion.

Despite loving HTML, I have neglected it in the past few weeks for Gemtext. The panoply of options in HTML is fun; the lack of them in Gemtext is freeing. By depriving me of equivalents to or , Gemtext forces me to think about the structure of my phrases, clauses, and sentences. I have to rely on the language to place emphasis. It's a way of thinking about English I've never had to do before, and one I deeply enjoy.

I started running Ubuntu again for the first time since 2008. Like a lot of people leaving abusive relationships, I didn't realize how badly I'd been treated by my OS until I ditched Windows and Android. My phone now runs Sailfish OS, which is a dream to use and offers a purpose-built IDE for creating native apps. Its developer fanbase is so fun I'll gladly learn C++ just to join them.

I learn new things daily. I spend my free time in the "zone of proximal development" – the thin Venn diagram overlap between "things I know" and "things I'm discovering," just before those two tip into the zone of "things that are too hard." The zone of proximal development is the optimal space for learning. For curious nerds like me, it's also the optimal space for fun.

I thought the computer had changed. It hadn't. My relationship to it had. Learning I could change that back has been one of the coolest discoveries I've ever made.

The computer doesn't have to be "that thing I'm stuck to so I can convince capitalism I deserve to eat." The computer can be Fun.

"but Molly, isn't your screen name a personal brand–"

Yes. I'm findable as "drmollytov" all over the small Web and Geminispace.

The difference is this: I chose to stick everything under one pseudonym for my convenience. It saves me from remembering a dozen different usernames. It also lets me cite myself more easily across genres/publications/protocols. It's not for other people; it's for me.

I make new things online almost daily. My Web site is now a repository of ideas, projects, and links, rather than a unitary mask trying to sell something. I can express the multitudes I contain.

I feel no pressure to create a Public Unitary Identity from my screen name. "drmollytov" is one name with multiple identities: librarian, gardener, retro games enthusiast, Trek fan, encyclopedia reading nerd, budding programmer, part-time subversive, rant factory, cat lady. I don't need to compress these into a single "career" or "identity."

The small Web (and Geminispace) frees me not only to contain multitudes but also to express them. There is room, room, room, in the many mansions of the Internet, for all of me.■

Molly Tov is a writer and librarian. She blogs at drmollytov.dev.

I had used a computer since I was a kindergartner in the late 1990s, and I am also old enough to remember dial-up internet. However, before I was a teenager, I never considered the possibility of me creating anything on the web, let alone crafting my own space on the web, because at the time I only used the internet to browse the web.

That changed radically in 2006, when I was in my early teen and introduced to the concept of blogs and blogging by "Xuehai Weekly," a Malaysian-Chinese magazine aimed at secondary school students.

I was immediately intrigued by the idea of blogging for multiple reasons: I already had been keeping my own physical journal at the time, and as an autistic kid (although I was unaware of my autism at the time) who struggled with social and verbal communication skills, I always felt more comfortable expressing my thoughts and feelings through writing. Therefore, I decided to try out blogging, without even the faintest idea of how it would change my life forever, and not even just online life either.

Blogging was my first foray into creating things on the web, so it opened up a whole new world of me making stuff on the web. Even to this day, being able to publish your own writing that other people can see remains the most revolutionary aspect of blogging to me. As a child, I had dreams about publishing my writing, specifically a book, without knowing the process involved in traditional publishing such as pitching yourself to a publisher, getting your manuscript approved, working with editors, and so on. However, all you need to publish your writing on a blog is an internet connection and a place for you to post your writing on the web. It was no wonder that my writing-loving teenage self was blown away by the concept of blogging.

The benefits of writing, such as learning and practicing expressing and organizing your ideas through words, are shared by blogging as well, though blogging offers the additional benefits of connecting with other fellow netizens, including fellow bloggers by commenting the things we wrote. When I started blogging in the 2000s, every blogging platform I had come across implement comment sections to individual blogs, but good old emails work just fine as well. In the 2000s, the Malaysian-Chinese blogging scene was also large enough to hold occasional physical gatherings, and I had attended two of such gatherings myself.

An expected influence blogs had on my teenage self was choosing my future career path.

The same secondary student magazine where I learned about blogs and blogging for the first time also introduced a few bloggers, with one of them being the Taiwanese blogger Book, who was a web designer. I enjoyed Book's blog and was fascinated by the design of her blog, which included a Flash animation as the header. Meanwhile, I began to learn basic HTML and CSS to edit blog themes and add widgets to my blog, and I was amazed by how these languages allowed us to customize our blogs, so through Book, I learned the existence of web design as a profession.

(Side note: I was pleasantly surprised to find out Book still blogs actively, now on boo2k.com, mainly about her travels with her family.)

However, since I did not personally know any web designers or developers at the time, nor anyone working in the tech field, I did not really know how to become a web designer. Later when I discovered graphic design as field, teenage me decided to pursue graphic design after graduating from secondary school, mistakenly thinking that it would give me opportunities to do web design work. I eventually ended up working as a graphic designer for 8 years, but I never got involved in web design, and other factors, including disillusionment with capitalism and the corporate world, caused my burnout from the graphic design field.

The 2000s saw the rise of blogs. Unfortunately, as years gone by, the state of blogging changed with the rise of search engine optimization (SEO) and social media. I was actually introduced to Facebook by a fellow Malaysian-Chinese blogger in 2007, by pitching Facebook as a more fun social network platform than Friendster, which might have been the most popular social network platform in Malaysia before the rise of Facebook. I did remember having fun on Facebook at first, especially with the games, before Facebook eventually blew up and became *the* biggest social media platform alongside Twitter.

While a gradual process, it was still noticeable that many Malaysian-Chinese bloggers, myself included, had begun to move away from personal blogs to Facebook. At the time, I did not think much about the implications of personal blogs getting replaced by social media, as I was not aware of how the commercial parts of the web would grow large

enough to be considered the mainstream by general internet audience.

Fortunately, my love for blogging never truly died, thanks to me discovering Tumblr in 2011. While Tumblr is also a social media platform, users are free to write long-form blog posts. The subject focus of my blog posts changed from personal ones in the 2000s to fandom ones, as my autistic self could not resist writing essays about my favorite entertainment media, and fandom activities were among the main things Tumblr became known for. Occasionally, I even got to make use of the HTML and CSS knowledge I learned in the 2000s to edit my Tumblr blog themes.

More importantly, Tumblr helped me realize I am queer, thanks to the large presence of LGBTQ+ people there, despite me initially following people there for fandom stuff. Tumblr was also an important place for me to start learning about leftist and left-learning politics more, and thus shaping my politics firmly on the left. The huge presence of autistic people on Tumblr made me fully realize I am autistic as well.

It was also through Tumblr that I discovered that personal websites and blogs were making a comeback.

In 2022, I discovered Neocities through a post on Tumblr that encouraged people to make their own websites. The notion piqued my interest, as I had never actually coded my own website from scratch, despite having heard of GeoCities – which Neocities is a spiritual successor to – and dabbled in HTML and CSS during my teenage blogging years. I registered an account on Neocities and started writing out the HTML and CSS of my first web page. Little did I know that making my own website would be another online endeavor that changed my life.

Coding my own website for the first time made me rediscover my interest in web design. Fortunately, compared to the 2000s, there have been a lot more resources available online to learn to code, including HTML and CSS. This time, I was deeply impressed by how much HTML and CSS had evolved since the 2000s, with the most notable game changer being CSS flexbox and grid replacing tables for styling a web page's layout.

Diving deeper into HTML and CSS led me to formally explore the web development field, starting with learning platforms such as FreeCodeCamp, and involving learning JavaScript for the first time. Meanwhile, learning that there are web and software developers who succeed in breaking into the field despite lacking a computer science degree, including those who previously worked in a different field, inspired me to switch my career path from graphic design to web development. Even as I aspired to become a professional web developer, my website that was initially launched on Neocities remained a great hobby project to practice web development.

After teaching myself web development and computer science through online courses, including FreeCodeCamp, Scrimba, and CS50's Introduction to Computer Science, for nearly two years, I got my first web developer job in August 2024. While the job did not last long, I am glad to have gained at least some working experience in web development, with my proudest achievement being successfully developing a WordPress plugin despite having never done so before getting the job.

After launching my website on Neocities and continuing to work on it, I decided to continue my blogging journey by adding a blog to my website in January 2023. I was pleased to find out later that there has been a resurgence of personal blogs as well. As a result, I made a brand new personal blog in October 2024 that is different from the blogs on my hobby website and my more professional developer website, to both honor my blogging roots that go way back in the 2000s and give my blogging journey a new beginning.

Making my own website opened the door for me to explore the web outside social media and the corporate web; the web that is referred by some as independent web, or indie web for short. The year of 2024 in particular was a major turning point of my relationship with the web, since it was the year I decided to become more active in participating in the indie web by connecting with personal website owners. I explored other personal websites more through links, left messages on other people's guestbooks, sent more emails to personal website owners, and joined more webrings, pixel clubs, web cliques, and fanlistings.

Furthermore, I joined indie web communities, such as 32-Bit Café, which I joined in June 2024, and omg.lol, which I joined in September 2024. Both are wonderful communities consisting of both hobbyist and professionals who are interested in a better web, as well as fellow personal website owners and bloggers who have provided inspirations for my own websites and blogs. Socializing with other people on the indie web made me learn that if we want to have a community, we need to put effort in making connections with and reaching out to other people, instead of relying on a particular platform, online or offline.

Making my own website and blog, as well as participating in the indie web helped me to cultivate a more meaningful relationship with the web, by carving my own space on the web by building personal websites and blogs, getting involved in communities outside corporate social media and pursuing web development as a career to help to build the web. I am a person who finds more satisfaction in creating stuff than merely consuming stuff, so my websites and blogs have been fantastic outlets for me to contribute to the web, as a netizen who grew up with the internet.

I am grateful of the indie web and its communities for making the effort in building a web outside corporate influence, for rekindling my interest in web design and web development that leads to my career transition to web development, for inspiring me to restart my personal blogging journey, and ultimately, for changing my online life for the better.

Hopefully, I can continue to contribute to the effort of building a better web, because the web has changed my life.■

Growing up with computers and the internet, Leilukin (they/she) is a queer and autistic Malaysian-Chinese Millennial hobbyist-turned-professional web developer who is passionate about making a better web through code, words, and art. You can check out their website on leilukin.com.

Flash Back: An “oral” history of Flash

by Silver

I don’t know what the first video game I ever played was. I would have been too young to remember. It very likely could have been a Flash game running in a web browser, patiently downloaded over a dial-up connection.

I got interested in computers at an early age, but it would take me a lot longer to really appreciate what a miracle and nightmare Flash was. Flash was a huge force that enabled many great applications but also loaded huge liabilities on millions of personal computers. Flash set our expectations of what the web could do, defined online culture, and enabled creative expressions online that HTML (et al.) couldn’t deliver. Yet it also had constant problems with security, performance, and accessibility, on top of installing a single corporate gatekeeper to the “full” web. It took hold on the web in only a few years after its creation, but would take about a decade to completely replace.

I was a toddler when Flash was born. Now I’m a grown-up and Flash has been dead for a few years. Everyone’s already left the funeral, so this is a good time for me to look back at what it was like to surf the web with Flash. Let’s look around the corpse and read the bones.

A hole in the web

The World Wide Web was originally created in 1989 just for passing documents around. For that purpose, the earliest forms of HTML worked fine: basic formatting, hyperlinks, images. However, as the ’90s went on, the web grew more and more into the mainstream. More and more participants in the web wanted more than just documents.

In the ’90s, the big buzzwords in technology were “Internet” (with always-uppercase “I”) and “multimedia.” Up until this point, multimedia on the web was just images, and if there was video or sound, web browsers would send you to your computer’s media player, like QuickTime or Windows Media Player. In terms of interactivity, there was pretty much just submitting forms and the earliest versions of JavaScript.

The web clearly had a hole. The web needed more multimedia and interactivity. Multiple solutions emerged to fill that hole: Java applets, Shockwave, and Flash were notable contenders.

When a page had embedded content, like a .SWF Flash file, web browsers would leave a hole in the web page and call up the appropriate program to fill that hole with content and handle user inputs. This kind of plug-in system would remain in all major web browsers until about the mid-to-late ’10s.

Light as a flash

By the late ’00s, broadband connections were commonplace but my family was still on dial-up. Since loading anything on the scale of megabytes took multiple minutes, I’d go to the library if I really needed high-speed internet access. Otherwise, at home, I’d stay away from anything that was bandwidth-intensive, like online videos. I preferred lighter content, like forums and Wikipedia. Guess what else worked well on home dial-up.

For a variety of reasons, Flash won out among all the “rich web” plugins and achieved

widespread adoption on the web. Installing Flash was practically a necessary step after getting a new computer.

Most notably, the Flash plug-in had a comparatively short start-up time and Flash content usually loaded quickly. Flash was born in a time when connecting to the internet via dial-up was still commonplace, so being light on bandwidth was an especially welcome feature. In those dial-up days, I would actually check the file sizes before I committed to waiting to load Flash content. That wait would be a good time to go get a snack or continue reading through a long Wikipedia article.

As a reference for how much loading times mattered, consider the case of the earliest episodes of Happy Tree Friends. It was probably the first ever animated show to be made specifically for online distribution. As part of making it online-friendly, the creators tried to reuse many graphics to reduce file size, knowing that many viewers were on dial-up. The very first episode of the show was released in 1999 as a Flash movie and it was less than a megabyte. At dial-up speeds of 56 kilobits per second, it would still take about a minute to load the episode. An equivalent video file would have been multiple megabytes.

A vector for creativity

The first song I found and listened to online was Weird Al’s Angry White Boy Polka, set to a music video animated in Flash, around 2003-2004. The web was the home for independent animation that would never make it on TV or get attention anywhere else.

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